

“Russia in the Western Hemisphere: Assessing Putin's Malign Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean”

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Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Green, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. It is my privilege to address you today on the issues related to Russia’s engagement in the Western Hemisphere by paying particular attention to the malign influence of the government of Vladimir Putin in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The brutal invasion by Putin’s Russia of sovereign Ukraine on February 24 has already resulted in the loss of thousands of innocent lives, millions of refugees, and disruption of global supply chains. Although Latin America and the Caribbean are located geographically far away from the war theater in Europe, the impact of the war is felt by Latin American economies: the growing consumer prices and higher volatility of local currencies are just a few of the evidence. At the same time, many Latin American governments hesitated to take an affirmative stand against the government of Vladimir Putin and, while condemning the cruelty of the war in Ukraine, allowed Russia to continue operating in the region via its diplomatic posts, state-sponsored media, economic ties and by promoting narratives of constructing a new world order alternative to the one led by the Western powers.

Against the above background, in today’s testimony, I will focus on the long-term objectives of Russia in this part of the world and Moscow’s preferred modus operandi. Next, I will evaluate the impact of the war in Ukraine on Russia’s relationships with authoritarian governments in the region, such as Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, as well as its burgeoning partnerships with nations like Argentina. Additionally, I will offer some policy recommendations on mitigating Russia’s malign influence in the region.

**Why does Latin America matter to Russia?**

Putin’s war in Ukraine reconfirmed that Russia's ruling elites consider the territory of the former Soviet Union as the most important geographical area for Moscow outside Russia's borders: Russian leaders insist that all governments outside the region must recognize Russia's special interests before advancing their relations with the countries of the former USSR.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Moscow

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Toal, “Near Abroad. Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus,” *Oxford Scholarship Online*, November 2020, <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780190253301.001.0001/isbn-9780190253301>

views the entire Western Hemisphere as the US priority area of security, political, economic, and social concerns. From this perspective, Putin's strategy toward Latin America and the Caribbean is guided by the logic of reciprocity, which has multiple manifestations in Russian foreign policy.<sup>2</sup>

First, it is an opportunity for Putin's government to show that Russia can respond reciprocally to the US support to the governments that have decided to advance their independent domestic and foreign policy agenda in Russia's neighboring countries without previous approval by the Kremlin. That is why, under the rule of Vladimir Putin, Russia prioritized strengthening political relations with the former Soviet allies like Cuba and Nicaragua, in addition to those regimes in the Western Hemisphere that emerged from the end of the 1990s to the beginning of the 2000th as part of the Latin American "pink tide"<sup>3</sup> and which narrative had been openly anti-American, like Venezuela. For the last twenty years, Russia has been using various means to support its allies in Latin America: arms sales, limited but timely financial aid, diplomatic backing in the United Nations and other multilateral forums, and facilitating sanctions evasion.<sup>4</sup>

Another pillar of Russia's Latin American strategy is strategic communication via an extensive network of government-controlled media outlets such as RT in Spanish (*RT Actualidad*) and Sputnik news agency (*Sputnik Mundo*). Before the war in Ukraine started, *RT Actualidad* was readily available everywhere in the region. In some cases, the channel was made available as part of public TV broadcasting systems (Argentina, Venezuela, and Cuba) or as part of the state satellite system in Bolivia. These media outlets had millions of followers on social networks and YouTube.<sup>5</sup> *RT Actualidad* and *Sputnik Mundo*'s narratives not only emphasize the role of Russia as a global player but also stress that the United States resists the process of Russia regaining its "due place" in the international arena and opposes building a new multipolar order with the participation of Latin American partners. Moreover, most of the programs aired by RT misinform viewers regarding the policies of the United States in Latin America on such sensitive issues as migration, liberal democracy, and economic and social issues.

Following the closure of RT's presence on YouTube and the cancelation of some of the contracts to broadcast RT's signal on private cable networks in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow used newly created alternative accounts and intensified its strategic communication via diplomatic outposts taking advantage of the scenario that Russia has diplomatic relations with all Latin American and Caribbean nations, with Embassies and Consulates located throughout the entire region. Russian diplomats seek to actively engage Latin American political leaders and civil societies by offering "alternative" explanations for the war in Ukraine and presenting Russia as a legitimate

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<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Rouvinski, "Russia in Latin America: A Framework of Analysis" in Vladimir Rouvinski and Victor Jiefets (eds.) "Rethinking Post-Cold War Russian-Latin American Relations." Routledge, July 2022, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003183372-3/russia-latin-america-framework-analysis-vladimir-rouvinski>

<sup>3</sup> "Pink tide" refer to the arrival of left-wing governments in many Latin American countries in the 2000th.

<sup>4</sup> For the case of Venezuela, see Vladimir Rouvinski, "Venezuela: Russia's Gordian Knot in Latin America" in Cynthia Arnson (eds.) "Venezuela's Authoritarian Allies: The Ties that Bind?", Woodrow Wilson Center, 2021, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/LAP\\_210510-Venezuelas%20Authoritarian%20Allies-V5.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/LAP_210510-Venezuelas%20Authoritarian%20Allies-V5.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Rouvinski, "Russia's Strategic Communication in Latin America and the Caribbean", Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy, Florida International University, October 2021, [https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/jgi\\_research/42/](https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/jgi_research/42/)

international actor, despite the government of Vladimir Putin violating fundamental principles of international law and committing severe human rights violations.

Last but not least, Russia has been using other tools to advance its strategy in Latin America, including support to the Russian Diaspora's associations affiliated with Russian embassies, cultural and educational exchanges, and other forms of public diplomacy. Here, seemingly benign cultural events still carry an important anti-US narrative. For example, recently, Russian Embassies promoted in Latin America a showing of the "Salyut 7" movie, which tells the story of a rescue mission by the Soviet cosmonauts to save the Soviet space station which, supposedly, was to be captured by the United States.<sup>6</sup> Other cultural activities pursue similar aims: to foment a positive image of contemporary Russia while criticizing the United States and diminishing the impact of the news reports regarding the authoritarian nature of Putin's political regime and his disrespect for the established international norms.

### **The impact of the war in Ukraine on Russia's engagement in Latin America**

By 2022, the Latin American strategy of the government of Vladimir Putin mostly brought about desired results. Today, Russia possesses stable diplomatic relations with all the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean, and the holders of Russian passports can travel freely anywhere in the region. Moscow constantly engages Latin American political leaders in highly-publicized public activities through regular high-level visits, strategic communication, selling arms to many Latin American armies, and creating links of economic interdependence by, for example, supplying fertilizers to some of the countries in the region.<sup>7</sup> It is in this context that the Russian war in Ukraine took by surprise many decision-makers in Latin America and the Caribbean. Despite the growing concentration of Russian troops on the border before the attack and the public warnings by the U.S. government on the war's inevitability, the leaders of Argentina and Brazil went to Russia shortly before the war began. They expressed their support for Putin's foreign policy. At the same time, then Russia's First Prime Minister, Yury Borisov, visited Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba just days before the war started and promised to broaden military cooperation with vital Russian allies in the Western Hemisphere.

As a result, as the war in Ukraine was unfolding, the leaders of Brazil and Argentina experienced difficulties finding a way to distance themselves from Russia. In fact, only a handful of nations, like Colombia's government of Ivan Duque, reconfirmed their commitment to the established world order and offered unconditional approval of the U.S. and European position about the conflict. This was met by fury in Moscow, and the Russian envoy to the United Nations (UN) used the presentation by the Colombian president at the UN Security Council (UNSC) to attack Colombia directly.<sup>8</sup> Yet, Colombia—and all other countries in the region—continued to maintain its full-scale diplomatic and trade relations with Russia.

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<sup>6</sup> Klim Shipenko, "Salyut 7", STV Film Company, October 2017, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6537238/>

<sup>7</sup> Roberto Samora, "South American nations push to exclude fertilizer from Russia sanctions", Reuters, March 10, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/south-american-nations-push-exclude-fertilizer-russia-sanctions-2022-03-10/>

<sup>8</sup> Colum Lynch, "Moscow Strikes Back at Countries That Cross It", *Foreignpolicy.com*, April 18, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/18/russia-war-united-nations-threat-colombia-genocide-security-council/>

The lack of consensus among important Latin American nations on the Russian war in Ukraine benefited Moscow by offering the Kremlin an opportunity to claim that the United States and the Western powers failed to achieve isolation of Russia in the international arena. However, in many other aspects, the continuation of Russia's strategy toward the region is facing several challenges. One of them is the significantly reduced capacity of Moscow to offer attractive incentives for foreign trade and economic cooperation for Latin American countries, including Putin's traditional allies, because of the war-related costs and the impact of economic sanctions. The other is the decreasing capacity to continue providing political backing in the international arena to Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, as well as to engage other Latin American nations in diplomatic activities since the government of Vladimir Putin has to cope with the growing international isolation of Russia itself. This new scenario could open the doors to diminish the malign influence of Putin's Russia in the region, as can be seen by taking a closer look at some of the bilateral relations.

### Venezuela

One of the opportunities is Moscow's alliance with Venezuela, Russia's gateway to Latin America. When Russia invaded Ukraine, Caracas approved the Russian standing in the war. At the same time, the evidence suggests that Kremlin may be losing its former attractiveness to the Maduro regime as a middleman who helped smuggle Venezuelan oil and provided other material support. Russian appeal as a powerful nation that could back Venezuela in the international arena has also diminished following the exclusion of Moscow from many important international structures, including the UN Human Rights Council.<sup>9</sup> If the US policy toward Venezuela changes, Vladimir Putin's government would need to make an extra effort to keep the alliance strong. However, considering the impact of the Western sanctions and the costs associated with the war in Ukraine, Russian material capacities are more limited now than ever. Therefore, it would be difficult for Moscow to allocate new tangible resources that Nicolas Maduro wishes for –including expanding military cooperation– while other states may be willing to restart their economic relations with Caracas, even if only partially.

### Nicaragua

In the case of Nicaragua, in the recent past, the government of Daniel Ortega has developed a great degree of dependence on Russian political support, and there are Russian military training installations on Nicaraguan soil. The government of Ortega became accustomed to being rewarded by the Kremlin, politically and economically, for small but symbolically significant –for Russia– gestures like diplomatic recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's separatist regions, in 2008, for which Russia provided economic aid and backed Nicaragua in the international arena. Yet, recently, Moscow did not offer any new incentives, and in 2022, Managua did not recognize Donetsk and Lugansk, Ukraine's separatist regions. Moreover, Daniel Ortega refused to meet the Speaker of the Russian Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, who arrived in Nicaragua with an official visit in early 2022. From this perspective, Ortega expects Putin to prove that Russia continues to be useful for Managua in the changing regional and global political and economic arrangements. Yet, Russian relations with Nicaragua are suffering from the limitation of tangible resources, similar to the case of Venezuela.

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<sup>9</sup> "UN General Assembly votes to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council", *News.un.org*, April 7, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782>

## Cuba

In the case of Cuba, while several joint projects had been announced,<sup>10</sup> there are reasonable doubts that they will be implemented under the current circumstances. In addition, highly publicized Russian aid to Cuba<sup>11</sup> had no real impact on the improvement of living conditions of ordinary Cubans in the long term, and, like Venezuela and Nicaragua, Havana is aware of the limitations in obtaining aid from Russia, which is desperately needed to keep the troubled Cuban economy afloat. That is why, from the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the position of Havana has been purposively unclear. Although Cuba avoids openly criticizing Russia and maintains an ambiguous political narrative, the current Cuban government does not want to become fully associated with Russian policy elsewhere because of the unpredictability of Vladimir Putin's actions, as demonstrated by the war in Ukraine, and since Cuba wishes to keep the maneuvering space open to adjusting its foreign policy should opportunities arise.

## Argentina

In many aspects, the current government of Argentina shares Russia's position on the need for power rearrangements on the global stage. In this context, although Argentinian President Fernandez eventually condemned the Russian aggression in Ukraine, he nevertheless allowed the Russian Embassy in Argentina and Russian media outlets to continue disseminating Moscow's official discourse freely to Argentinians. Moreover, Argentina sustained plans for economic collaboration with Russia, and many other contacts, such as cultural and education cooperation, continue. Overall, the government of Argentina tilted the balance more towards the acquittal of the actions of the Russian government than towards defending the rights of Ukrainians, which are universal human rights openly violated by Moscow. In this respect, Alberto Fernández's position, supported by his vice president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, differs sharply from the US and other Western countries and allows Russia to play its political spectacle in Argentina, misleading ordinary Argentinians as to the genuine Russian goals in the region. At the same time, Argentina benefits from a robust civil society and free press that have been very active in denouncing Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the dangers of allying with Putin's current international standing.

As for other Latin American nations, many of them -like Chile and Colombia- have been experiencing historical changes in their domestic political realms. These governments do not perceive Russia's influence as their priority at the moment. Besides, the governments of Chile and Colombia seek to pursue an "active non-alliance" strategy,<sup>12</sup> which Putin's Russia has started to interpret as the support of its "multipolar world order" narrative. Another key nation of the region, Brazil, is in the midst of an electoral campaign, and the current President, Jair Bolsonaro, aspires for a new term. At the same time, his country depends on the Russian critical supply of fertilizers. This is one of the reasons why Brasilia evaded providing full support to the United States and their Western allies and

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<sup>10</sup> "Yury Borisov meets with Deputy Prime Minister of Cuba Ricardo Cabrisas", The Russian Government Official Website, <http://government.ru/en/news/45802/>

<sup>11</sup> "Llega a Cuba un nuevo cargamento de ayuda humanitaria enviada por Rusia", *RT Actualidad*, January 25, 2022. <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/417918-cuba-cargamento-ayuda-humanitaria-rusia>

<sup>12</sup> The concept of "active non-alliance" suggests that "rather than letting themselves be pressured to side either with Washington or with Beijing in a nascent Second Cold War, Latin American countries should focus on their own interests", See "Book Launch: Active Non-Alignment by Ambassador Jorge Heine", *The University of British Columbia website*, February 28, 2022. <https://sppga.ubc.ca/events/event/book-launch-active-non-alignment-by-ambassador-jorge-heine/>

did not impose any sanctions on Russia. Moscow is carefully observing the unfolding new scenarios in the region and will attempt to expand its political contacts with Santiago, Bogota, and Brasilia as part of Putin's reciprocity strategy.

### **Policy recommendations**

The Russian war in Ukraine's impact on Latin America offers the United States new opportunities. One of them is to review the previous approaches to cope with the political regimes that served as Russia's gateways to the region. Since Moscow's capacities to provide economic and political support to Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba have significantly diminished, they may be willing to adopt new strategies in their bilateral relations with the United States. This is particularly evident in the case of Venezuela, where limited US engagement in the energy sector could become a game-changer and, eventually, reduce other threats to security in the region, including illegal drug trafficking and the refugee crisis. Besides, the reactivation of the oil sector will likely alleviate the living conditions of ordinary Venezuelans and pave the way for a possible power transition in Venezuela. Similarly, this step would improve US energy security and directly benefit US companies.

In the case of other Latin American nations, it is essential to keep in mind that one of the factors that allowed Russia to advance its Latin American policy is the use of the narrative of building a new world order, which allegedly could benefit Latin America, combined with the perception held by many Latin Americans that the region is no more a priority to the United States.<sup>13</sup> In this context, introducing a coordinated US-Latin American communication strategy emphasizing the value of shared US-Latin American interests combined with high-level public events will make it more difficult for Russia to continue exploiting anti-American sentiments. On top of that, broad information coverage of US-Latin American cooperation in cybersecurity, countering transnational organized crime, and offsetting illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, among others, would help stress the value of "having Americans as friends" for both elites and ordinary Latin Americans.

Lastly, increasing support for civil society and investigative journalism is also necessary. Both are critical allies in combating Russia's incidence in the region. On the one hand, the role of civil society is vital in promoting democratic values and democratic political culture. On the other hand, investigative journalism has proven effective in exposing the true nature of pro-Russia authoritarian regimes in Europe, Asia, and Africa by revealing the corruption and wrongdoings linked to many of Russia's bilateral relations. In Latin America, we have yet to see such reports, although the existence of such ties has been demonstrated by academic research.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, I would like to emphasize that the war in Ukraine showed that the regime of Vladimir Putin seeks not to help build new world order but to carry out an expansionist agenda of Russian contemporary political elites. That is why an information strategy that aims to challenge the Russian narrative combined with public diplomacy and strengthened civil society could seize opportunities for successful disinformation

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<sup>13</sup> Scott Morgenstern & Asbel Bohigues, "Battling for the Hearts and Minds of Latin Americans: Covariance of Attitudes toward the United States and China", *Latin American Research Review*, June 2021, 56(2), pp. 280–299. <http://doi.org/10.25222/larr.656>

<sup>14</sup> Alejandro Cardozo Uzcátegui & Victor Mijares, "The versatile amalgam: Interests and corruption in Russia-Venezuela relations," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, May 2020, 109, pp. 181–202. <http://doi.org/10.32992/erlacs.10557>

campaigns regularly conducted by Moscow through government-controlled media outlets and Russian embassies.

In conclusion, I thank the Subcommittee for this opportunity to share my views, and I look forward to your questions.